



Education Committee

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Increasing Rural Broadband Access

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Position:

The State of Iowa Youth Advisory Council should support increasing the funding for infrastructure to increase broadband access and speed in rural areas.

Position

It should be the position of the State of Iowa Youth Advisory Council, the voice of Iowa's youth, to support the enactment of legislation that increases the funding and accessibility of rural broadband. Broadband is high capacity transmission techniques that provide Internet and communication services.¹

Rationale

Nationally, over 90 percent of the population has fixed access (the use of radio signals for high speed internet access in rural areas) to the Internet at adequate speeds, defined as 25 Mbps download speed.² However, only 62.2 percent of Iowa's rural population has that level of access and speed. Iowa, with 82.8 percent of the population having access to broadband and only 54.5 percent having fixed access, is ranked 33rd in the country in terms of adequate broadband connectivity.³ As of September 2019, there are 343,000 Iowans who do not have access to a wired connection capable of 25

¹“What Is Broadband?” *Broadbandmatters.com*, Iowa Communications Network, 2019, Retrieved October 15, 2019, from <https://broadbandmatters.com/what-broadband>.

²*State Laws and Policies Affecting Broadband*. The Network for Public Health Law, Nov. 2018, www.networkforphl.org/asset/vd3cbp/Fact-Sheet---State-Laws-and-Policies-Affecting-Broadband-Access-in-Eight-Northern-Region-States.pdf.

³Schmidt, Mitchell. “How Many Iowans Are Connected to High-Speed Internet? Depends on Your Source.” *Iowa Ideas*, The Gazette, 17 June 2019. Retrieved 12 October 2019, www.thegazette.com/IowaIdeas/stories/regional-development/how-many-iowans-are-connected-to-high-speed-internet-depends-on-your-source-20180621.

Mbps download speed and 474,000 Iowans who have access to only one wired provider, leaving no options to switch providers. There are an additional 109,000 Iowans who do not have any wired internet providers available where they live.⁴

Lack of broadband in communities can create disparities in education for students living in rural and underserved areas. With online curricula and resources becoming a vital part of the educational experience, this puts many rural students at a significant disadvantage compared to the rest of the nation. Over 70% of teachers assign homework that requires the Internet, and 65% of students use the Internet at home to complete schoolwork in America.⁵ The Internet hosts a variety of benefits. It is seen to support a new culture of learning that is based on collective innovation and exploration. Educators find that the Internet offers individuals enhanced access to sources of knowledge and expertise that exist outside of their immediate environment. Moreover, the Internet allows students to personalize their learning environment through online resources that they choose to interact with.⁶ In underserved areas, broadband creates equity in education, allowing students to access material and classrooms online that they would otherwise not be exposed to. In America, over six million students take an online class.⁷ Lack of broadband prohibits the affected areas from accessing the educational opportunities provided by the Internet. Students with little to no connection to the Internet at adequate speeds lose access to various methods of learning and resources, putting them at a severe disadvantage in the United States. However, lack of broadband infrastructure impacts more than education. Limited broadband access can hinder the economy, healthcare, agriculture and more.

Several states have increased funding and allowed municipalities to improve Internet connectivity. Indiana released a project that allocates \$100 million toward a broadband grant program in 2018.⁸ Tennessee has allocated \$45 million towards their broadband accessibility grant program in the past three years.⁹ The State of North Carolina approved funding their broadband grant program at \$15 million annual for the next ten years.¹⁰

⁴ Boshart, Rod, and Thomas Friestad. "Rural Internet Is Key to Iowa's Development." *The Gazette*, 13 Oct. 2019. Retrieved 17 October, 2019, from

www.thegazette.com/subject/news/iowa-rural-internet-development-20191014

⁵ McLaughlin, Claire. "The Homework Gap." *NEA Today*, 3 Feb. 2017. Retrieved October 18th, 2019, from neatoday.org/2016/04/20/the-homework-gap/.

⁶ Selwyn, Neil. "The Internet and Education." *OpenMind*. Retrieved October 24th, from www.bbvaopenmind.com/en/articles/the-internet-and-education/.

⁷ Delzotto, Nicholas. "How Has the Internet Changed Education?" *It Still Works*, 10 Jan. 2019. Retrieved October 5th, 2019, from www.itstillworks.com/internet-changed-education-1437.html.

⁸ Erdody, Lindsey. "Holcomb Plans Infrastructure Projects ." *Indianapolis Business Journal*, 4 Sept. 2018. Retrieved October 30th, 2019, from www.ijb.com/articles/70344-holcomb-plans-1b-in-infrastructure-projects-funded-by-hike-in-toll-road-fees.

⁹ "Tennessee Broadband Accessibility Act." *Tennessee State Government*, Department of Economic & Community Development, Retrieved October 28th, 2019, from www.tn.gov/economic-development/tennessee-broadband-grant-initiative/tennessee-broadband-accessibility-act-article.html.

¹³ Tamarov, Maxim. "How Broadband Access Benefits Rural North Carolina." *Government Technology*, 1 Nov. 2019. Retrieved November 3rd, 2019. www.govtech.com/network/How-Broadband-Access-Benefits-Rural-North-Carolina.html.

Minnesota, Michigan, and Washington also increased funding, allocating 20 million dollars in 2019 towards broadband.^{11 12 13} Additionally, Wisconsin designated \$95.2 million for the next two years to

close the digital divide between rural and urban areas.¹⁴ Similarly, Illinois approved \$420 million dollars to upgrade and expand broadband infrastructure.¹⁵ Colorado differs, establishing broadband through local governments. In 2005, Colorado passed Senate Bill 152, allowing local governments to fund broadband, if approved by a majority of the municipalities' voters. Over 100 towns/municipalities and 40 counties have voted to increase funding broadband funding in the past 15 years.¹⁶ Likewise, New Hampshire allows local governments to issue bonds to fund publicly owned broadband infrastructure.¹⁷ Contrasting this, local governments in Iowa cannot fund broadband according to Iowa law. The state government offers grants for broadband infrastructure, but they are poorly funded. In April of 2019, only \$1.5 million were used to fund broadband through grants.¹⁸ Furthermore, these grants do not solve the issue of rural disconnectivity alone. In rural areas, the broadband grants are rarely pursued, due to the lack of interested private businesses in rural Iowa. Adjusting the language in the Iowa Code allows counties and municipalities/towns to fund broadband in that area.

Recommended Action

1. Adjust language in Iowa Code §388.10 to allow municipalities/towns and counties to fund broadband infrastructure.
2. Increase funding to the Empower Rural Iowa Broadband Grant Program to expand the number of grants awarded and the amount of money allocated to each grant.

Regards,

Education Committee
State of Iowa Youth Advisory Council
